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Spring 2021

Knots Undone - A Short Story

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Recommended Citation

Yaceczko, Kaylie, "Knots Undone - A Short Story" (2021). *Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects*. 1314.

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Senior Honors Project

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23 April 2021

“Knots Undone” – Summary

“Knots Undone” is a short story about three friends on a road trip to their college friend’s wedding, and on the way, the reader gets an in-depth look at their friendship and how different types of relationships—such as friendship, romantic, familial, and interpersonal—have different effects on us depending on our point in life. The narrator, Jordan, struggles to open herself up to her friends once her best friend, Dakota, moves back home to Akron, so she finds herself consumed by social media. Colton consistently goes above and beyond for his friends and other people he cares about, and Bailey, unfortunately, takes advantage of this. The purpose of the story as a whole—between their journey to the wedding and flashbacks to when Dakota still lived nearby—is to highlight how one-sided and sometimes even toxic relationships can negatively impact our own wellbeing and prevent us from growing into who we are meant to be. Jordan eventually learns from these relationships and comes to accept the transitional point in her life through her evolving, and even devolving, friendships.

Self-Reflection

To be completely transparent, I never expected this story to evolve into what it did. When I began college four years ago and first heard about the giant honors thesis project at the end of my senior year, it was overwhelming to think about for too long, and I truthfully wasn't sure if I would even be able to do it when the time came. It was just a looming task that was always lingering in the corner, waiting to be taken on. Even when I first began drafting the piece, it wasn't my intention to fall headfirst into the narrative—and develop it into a story that would help me not only understand those around me but also better understand myself. Even when I began writing the story, I never planned on writing something that would be double the number of pages that I intended, but once I began, it was difficult to not allow the story to grow into what it was meant to be. During the earliest stages of the writing and drafting process, I quickly found myself slipping into the narrative and developing a desire to not only create relatable characters in the story, but I also wanted to understand where each was coming from and how to recognize these kinds of people in everyday life.

The initial plan for the story was to build off an idea of a group of friends driving across the country to attend the funeral of a mutual friend, and the goal was to present a story that highlighted toxic relationships and answered the question of why so many people find themselves struggling to get out of these friendships. Speaking from personal experience, I have had my fair share of friendships that had devolved from having people I could rely on most to someone I would actively avoid in all aspects of life. Maybe it was just me, but I would struggle to distance myself—or at least stick up for myself—when in these friendships out of fear of hurting feelings or coming across as mean myself. I wanted to write a narrative focusing on not only these friendships, but how they also have a negative impact on us as individuals. At least, that's how it started.

I wanted the characters in the story to feel as genuine as they possibly could, so I tried to pull from moments and people in my life who have both experienced these kinds of friendships as well as those who caused tensions between friends. Colton and Bailey especially had the most real-life influences and came from complete opposite ends of the spectrum. One was inspired by a dear friend who buried their own struggles behind helping others, and the other ended up being a blend of multiple people who I have met along the way of life. Jordan, admittedly, ended up having a few of my own traits, or at least who I had been in the past. She had the parts of myself that I was never fond of, and what I wanted to demonstrate through Jordan—and the other characters—was how growing up and sometimes outgrowing people and parts of life is okay, even if it's painful. Dakota was really the only character who was not inspired by someone I had known, which in the end, was fitting for his character because he was meant to be someone Jordan had built up in her mind and even placed on a pedestal out of guilt and longing for what her life used to be like. Through his illness and leaving, Jordan has to learn when to move on and, even more importantly, how to express how she's feeling to those she cares about the most in her life.

Even in their earliest stages of their characterization, each of the three main characters were meant to represent the different types of toxic relationships everyone encounters at one point or another in life. Colton was meant to be the classic doormat, someone who silently worked hard and looked out for everyone else no matter how much it took out of him. Bailey was someone who knew Colton would go to the ends of the earth for someone he cares about and used that to her advantage, but like the people who inspired his character, Colton rarely sticks up for himself. I found myself liking Colton more than the other characters fairly early on in the writing process because of how he reminds me of so many people I have known and in some

ways myself as well. Bailey's character is meant to represent people we meet in lives who have those bigger personalities and, while they may begin with having good intentions, eventually take advantage of people like Colton who are willing to do what they can for their friends simply because they are able to do so. In a way, Colton and Bailey bring out both the best and the worst in each other, and it says a lot about how friendships can turn into the idea that they were meant to save us from, which is people not caring about us after all.

Jordan's character struggled with toxic attachments due to her general inability to communicate her emotions, and she uses social media to cope with everything that goes wrong in her life. Growing up in a world of technology, social media has had a prominent role in my life since around middle school, and I have seen how so many people can latch themselves onto the instant validation and reassurance that comes with it. On the other side, social media has been the root of so many problems in not only my own life but also most of my friends. As much as I hate to admit it, there have been times where I had looked into a situation too much because of something I saw on Instagram or Twitter, and I have seen nearly all of my friends have their own moments of emotionally spiraling over something someone posted. I wanted Jordan to be someone who used her phone as a way to escape her problems in the real world but also search for new ones.

As I wrote the story, I found myself becoming more and more invested in these characters because I was able to connect with each of them in different ways. While I'm not sure if I had done it subconsciously or not, these characters are written in a time in their lives where they are preparing to embark on the next chapter in their life, and they struggle to wrap their heads around venturing out into the real world, especially Jordan, because they have to abandon a life they had known and grew comfortable with for so long. My senior year has been in no way

what I expected given I only had one class on campus for the entire academic year during the pandemic, so I have had a rather difficult time making the connection that after the semester ends, I'm done with college. It's been a tough pill to swallow because my expectations had been so high before everything happened. Now graduation is around the corner, and while I like to believe I have a plan for what is next for me, the fear of the unknown still patiently waits for me regardless of if I am ready or not. I know I'm not the only student at the University or even in the country who feels this way, so I wanted to write characters who were experiencing emotions similar to ours in hopes of creating a sense of camaraderie for my generation, or at least for me.

I had used inspiration from writers like Stephen Chbosky and Raymond Carver when writing "Knots Undone" because both of these writers have a great deal of skill with presenting important themes in subtle ways. I didn't want the story to be too in your face with its themes because I wanted readers to relate to it in ways that were specific to them, and everyone has different experiences with these kinds of relationships and periods in life. When I first read both *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* the first time, I was taken aback by how much each both affected me and how much I could relate to their stories. With each read and reread of these works, I would continue to find new moments and themes I connected with, and I wrote "Knots Undone" with the hope of providing this feeling to another reader like me. With the works of Chbosky and Carver, I also had the advantage of having different coming-of-age films influence how I approached the story and wrote the characters. Movies like *Obvious Child* (2014), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), and *Singles* (1992) helped me gain a better understanding of how different relationships can be presented from the perspective of a writer because of how the characters relied on one another and themselves to grow. I was able to connect with many of characters in the movies and found myself thinking

about it long after they ended. What I've learned is that while this kind of story can be told again and again, we all still relate to and love them because these experiences are universal. We all grew up not knowing who we are, what we wanted to be, and fumbled when trying to say how we feel or what we really mean, and these stories continue to resonate with us because they help us visualize where we began, where we are now, and where we can one day be. My hope was that "Knots Undone" would provide readers with the same sense of nostalgia and growth from youth.

I have known for a long time that writing fiction was something I wanted to do, and while my time at the University has allowed my writing to grow in ways I never thought possible, I do not think I have felt as proud of a piece as I do "Knots Undone." I had never become as invested in characters or a plot as I have here, and I am so grateful for the wonderful people who have helped me every step of the way to get the story where it is now. I learned so much about myself throughout the entire process, and I noticed how I've been able to identify and work through my own issues while writing these characters. "Knots Undone" has easily been one of my favorite projects that I have done while at The University of Akron, and it was through the planning and writing process in the past year that helped me solidify my decision to eventually pursue an MFA and take my own writing more seriously. I never expected my college experience to as fulfilling and wonderful as it was, and this final project was the best way to finish my undergraduate at the University.

Transitional Periods and the Effect on Relationships: A Critical Analysis

Throughout life, people establish relationships and bonds with others either within their family or with people they meet along the way. While these bonds can bring joy and fulfillment, there are times when certain relationships—either familial, friendships, or romantic partners—can fall apart over time. Many individuals struggle to leave toxic relationships because they want to hold on to when it was once good, and these relationships become especially apparent when one experiences a transitional period in life, such as graduating school, starting a new job, or moving to a different town. Friendships and romantic relationships are not always meant to last a lifetime, but every relationship formed brings a lesson to carry throughout life. The purpose of “Knots Undone” is to depict how these different relationships not only affect the individual but also the people around them, but these moments have repeatedly appeared in literature, from young adult fiction to classic literary works. Authors like Raymond Carver and Stephen Chbosky have written powerful characters and incorporate the subtle nuances of the relationships for the characters to experience while undergoing their own stress and trauma. What both authors have in common is their use of subtlety and providing details that answer everything that goes unsaid in all types of relationships, whether in family, friendship, or romance.

In Stephen Chbosky’s coming of age novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the reader follows the journal entries from Charlie, a freshman who befriends two high school seniors as he struggles to find his place in a new school. While dealing with both the everyday struggles of youth and some even some darker themes, Chbosky uses Charlie’s narrative to demonstrate the importance of friendship when dealing with external and internal obstacles. Throughout the novel, Charlie repeatedly hints at a larger issue that he avoids dealing with emotionally—that issue being sexually assaulted by his aunt at a young age—and he does not address this trauma until after bonding with his friend and crush, Sam, over her own experience with assault. Due to

his experiences and trauma, Charlie struggles to express his emotions explicitly throughout the novel, but his friendships help him overcome this fear because they return the feeling of being safe for him, something his family is unable to do. Chbosky makes a smart decision as an author to have the reader learn of what happened to Charlie as he realizes it himself because it demonstrates how suddenly his innocence is taken from him.

The heart of *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* is the importance of friendship, especially in times of emotional distress. Charlie finds himself at a point in life where he discovers the path he needs to be on while he chooses to build friendships with people who are also entering a major transitional period, which is graduating high school to pursue the real world. Charlie quickly latches onto his friendship with Patrick and Sam because they help him find his place in his new environment and give him the sense of safety that had been taken from him early on in his life, and when he introduces his family to the, he explains how

“By the time dinner was over, and they all left, all my mom said was that Mary Elizabeth was smart, and all my dad said was my “girlfriend” was pretty. They didn’t say anything about Sam or Patrick. And all I wanted the whole night was for them to know my friends. That was very important to me.” (Chbosky 130)

While he may not have realized it, Charlie’s main struggle throughout the novel is his relationship with his family, and he uses his friendships to process his trauma, which results in him holding his friendships and the idea of being a good friend higher than anything else.

Throughout *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie refers to the reader as “Dear Friend” to symbolize him bringing even the reader close to his story, as he only allows himself to be vulnerable with his friends. Without explicitly saying it, Chbosky demonstrates how trauma affects young adults

The Perks of Being a Wallflower demonstrates the significance of finding people to rely on when processing trauma, and these people can be found outside of one's family. Chbosky deliberately writes Charlie to be a character who struggles to express his emotions but also has a deep connection and loyalty to those he cares about. Throughout the novel, Charlie makes a habit of gifting his friends records he believes they will enjoy. Music has a prominent role within the novel because Charlie communicates his affection for his friends through music, and he explains how when he listened to songs in the car with his friends, "Sam sat down and started laughing. Patrick started laughing. I started laughing. And in that moment, I swear we were infinite" (Chbosky 39). "Knots Undone" focuses on the evolving—or devolving—friendship and the importance of having people to rely on when going through times of emotional distress, and what Charlie's friends bring him is the sense of security, helping him open up to others and himself during a point of transition in his life. Charlie experiences a great deal of trauma before the novel—including sexual assault and the loss of a friend to suicide—and finds peace through building his relationships with his friends and family.

Chbosky's novel explores transitional periods during childhood into young adulthood, but Raymond Carver deepens this idea in his short story collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, by examining these emotions when growing from youth into adulthood. In the opening story, "Why Don't You Dance?" a middle-aged man hosts a sale in his front yard of many of his belongings and spends time with a young couple looking to buy these items. While Carver never explicitly states the station of life in which each of the characters find themselves, but based on the text, the reader can see that both the man and the young couple are experiencing transition and change in their lives. The young couple want to make, what appears to be, their first major purchases as adults and go to the garage sale to save money for their new apartment,

so a reader can infer they are likely growing into adulthood and as romantic partners. They show most interest in the more practical items like the bed and a television, but they still maintain a level of playfulness that young people do in newer relationships:

“How does it feel?” she said.

“It feels firm,” he said.

She turned on her side and put her hand to his face.

“Kiss me,” she said.

“Let’s get up,” he said.

“Kiss me,” she said.

She closed her eyes. She held him.

He said, “I’ll see if anybody’s home.”

But he just sat up and stayed where he was, making believe he was watching the television. (Carver 5)

What Carver does through this small insight of the young couple’s life together is reveal the liminality of their point in life. Both the girl and the boy feel a sense of responsibility to make practical decisions—buying a bed for themselves and making sure to offer ten dollars less than the price—but there is still hope and excitement between them as in their childhood when the only concern was to be happy.

In comparison to the young couple, the middle-aged man running the garage sale appears to be facing his own period of transition. Much like with the girl and the boy, Carver does not outright state why the man wants to sell most of his belongings. What “Why Don’t You Dance?” presents to the reader, however, is a character experiencing the end of a chapter in life. Whether he is experiencing the end of a marriage or the death of his wife, the man carries a sense of loss

and closure throughout the story. What the man has in common with the young couple is finding difficulty in letting go of the past, and all three characters look to hold onto happier times. In fact, the man rearranges the furniture in the yard sale exactly as it had been in the bedroom and explains how, “nightstand and reading lamps on his side of the bed, nightstand and reading lamp on her side. His side, her side.” (Carver 3). The garage sale’s purpose for the man is to help him move on from his own relationship; however, he struggles to do so from the comfort of routine his marriage gave him. Upon seeing the young couple on the bed, the man eventually lets go of his own past to help the girl and the boy embark on a journey of their own, making the scene of the three of them drinking and dancing to his old records represent him passing a metaphoric torch to help them all begin a new life.

“Why Don’t You Dance?” represents the significance of experiencing and embracing transitional periods through the brief friendship between the man and the young couple. Both the couple and the middle-aged man experience opposite yet similar changes in their lives, which are moving in with a significant other versus moving away from the memory of one, and they rely on one another to survive an otherwise intimidating time. One of the most powerful moments in the story is when the man and the girl dance together, and when he tells her he hopes the couple likes the bed, the girl “pushed her face into the man’s shoulder. She pulled the man closer. “You must be desperate or something, she said.” (Carver 9). In these few lines, the reader sees how the man accepts the beginning of a new time for himself, and the girl also accepts the end of childhood and the start of a new era with the boy. Carver makes a wise decision to keep this revelation between the two characters unspoken because it not only allows the characters to process their emotions on their own, but it also allows the reader to make personal connections to their own life, as many epiphanies are not always stated aloud. The main connection “Why Don’t

You Dance?” has to “Knots Undone” lies in how the dynamic between the characters drive the story, even when the reasoning behind the relationship’s significance not explicitly stated.

Carver’s characters rely on each for closure as well as growth between who they have been and who they are going to be, and much like in Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, these relationships help characters heal from past trauma and pain that people are not always ready to talk about, especially to complete strangers.

The title story of the collection. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love,” follows a similar path with the themes of love and the differing stages of life. Over a bottle of gin, two couples spend an entire evening discussing what they believe love to be, and each couple brings a different perspective based on where they are in their relationship and stage in life. The narrator and his wife, who he met through work, have been together for eighteen months, and they predominantly express their love for one another through physical touch, an act that newlywed and younger couples tend to do. While Mel talks to the group, the narrator and his wife repeatedly show each other physical affection, and they use their affections to demonstrate how they feel about one another. When Laura tells Nick to say something in response to how they know what love is for them, “For an answer, I took Laura’s hand and raised it to my lips. I made a big production out of kissing her hand. everyone was amused” (Carver 143). As the other couple points out later in the story, Nick and Laura happily find themselves in the honeymoon phase of their relationship and life. Carver purposefully chooses to have the younger couple not speak as much on love as Mel and Terri because their relationship currently stands in a place where everything is still simple. Because they are at a point in life where they may have not had any particularly difficult conversations regarding love or their relationship, they rely on physical affection to express their emotions to one another. Keeping in mind that both Laura and Nick are

in their second marriage, Carver demonstrates how love must be expressed in multiple ways in order to last. Throughout the story, Nick has little to say about his relationship with his wife at all, suggesting that their marriage may not have as much depth or is as developed as ones with more experience.

Like Nick and Laura, Mel and Terri had been married before getting together, and they each bring a different perspective to what they believe love is because of their previous relationships. In fact, Terri pokes fun at Nick and Laura for how in love they seem because their marriage is still new, and she tells Laura how after the honeymoon phase ends, they will not maintain that same level of positive and public intimacy. Terri's previous husband had been abusive and eventually committed suicide over it, and she repeatedly describes how this love had been real. She argues how her ex-husband had truly loved her, even if his ways of showing it are questionable as he eventually stalked Terri and Mel before he passed and even caused Mel to feel the need to purchase a gun. Mel disagrees in believing Ed's love for Terri is genuine, and he focuses on how his love for his own ex-wife drastically changed, saying, "There was a time when I thought I loved my first wife more than life itself. But now I hate her guts. I do. How do you explain that" (Carver 144). In contrast from Nick and Laura, Mel and Terri represent how relationships develop and become more complex over time, but their marriage also follows the idea that love must be expressed in multiple ways. While Mel and Terri mention they both deeply love one another, the gin helps them reveal how they maybe lacking some needs in their relationship. Terri insists that Ed truly loved her because of the grand gestures he took for her, even if these gestures had negative and permanent consequences, and Mel dismisses this kind of love and reflects on how temporary love is. Both look for security in their marriage, but based on the context, they may not be fulfilling one another's emotional needs, which may be why Terri

has almost no reaction when Mel tells Laura that if the situation were different, he would fall in love with her.

What Carver does through both “What We Talk About When We Talk About Love” and “Why Don’t You Dance?” is demonstrate how people express their true emotions and process trauma. The middle-aged man and the young couple all have reservations about beginning new eras in their lives, so they rely on one another for reassurance even if they never outright state how they feel. Nick and Laura represent the joy and simplicity of the honeymoon phase in a relationship, while Mel and Terri’s marriage has had more time to develop even if they may also struggle to communicate their needs and trauma to one another. Carver writes these characters in more subtle ways to allow the reader to come to their own conclusions about them and the story, but this style also leads to more readers being able to deeply connect the characters to their own experiences. Adults can relate to the characters in Carver’s *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* collection just as younger readers can connect with Charlie in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* because how the characters deal with their emotions in authentic ways. The characters in “Knots Undone” have trouble expressing how they truly feel, and the reader has to rely on what the characters do and say to determine what they are experiencing. Few people in life have the ability to process and communicate their emotions in a healthy way, and both Chbosky and Carver demonstrate how this happens in their writing.

People will create and lose relationships throughout every stage of life, and everyone has people and relationships they depend on when experiencing personal and emotional difficulties and trauma. When writing their stories, Stephen Chbosky and Raymond Carver create characters with deep emotions and struggles rather than having complex plots because more readers will be able to relate to them. Both authors write with the intention of connecting with a wide range of

readers because the feelings of miscommunication and not saying everything you are thinking happens universally, so they utilize subtle nuances in relationships to create authentic interactions between characters. In conclusion, “Knots Undone” is inspired by these writers and their work because the story takes place at a point in the lives of its characters where they transition into new chapters of life and out of past friendships, so the story also requires more subtlety to show how different events and people affect the individual to demonstrate how people can experience growth from any relationship.

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